

THE DYNAMICS OF MIGRATION AND WOMEN'S QUEST FOR SURVIVAL IN AMMA DARKO'S *THE HOUSEMAID*

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Abstract

This research paper is a critical examination of the dynamics of migration and women's quest for survival in *The Housemaid* by Amma Darko. The study reads the rural-urban migration of women in the novel as a transition into new forms of precarity and vulnerability fashioned by harsh socio-economic structures brought about by patriarchy. It asserts that female characters are steadily downgraded to precarious socio-economic positions through gender expectations, exploitive labor structures and migratory dislodgment. Drawing on a postcolonial feminist approach, the study demonstrates how internal migration functions as a device that deepens women's marginalization in repressive urban environments. The article contends that Darko's narrative exposes the structural continuity between migration and socio-economic vulnerability of women as well as the survival politics deployed to respond to this socio-economic precariousness. The study ends up to reveal that migration contributes to the feminization of social marginality through gender labor roles. Ultimately, the study calls for the authorities and decision markers to implement social politics that contribute to women's empowerment in order to counter social precarity and marginality.

Keywords: Migration, women, marginality, gender, survival politics.

*La dynamique de la migration et la quête de survie des femmes dans *The Housemaid* d'Amma Darko*

Résumé

Cet article de recherche propose une analyse critique des dynamiques de la migration et la quête de survie de la femme dans *The Housemaid* d'Amma Darko. L'étude interprète la migration rurale-urbaine des femmes dans le roman comme une transition vers de nouvelles formes de précarité et vulnérabilité, façonnées par des structures socio-économiques rigides issues du patriarcat. Elle affirme que les personnages féminins sont progressivement déclassés en positions socio-économiques précaires par le biais des attentes liées au genre, des structures de travail abusives et du déracinement migratoire. S'appuyant sur une approche féministe postcoloniale, l'étude démontre comment les migrations internes fonctionnent comme un mécanisme qui accentue la marginalisation des femmes dans des environnements urbains répressifs. L'article soutient que le récit d'Amma Darko révèle la continuité structurelle entre la migration et la vulnérabilité économique des femmes ainsi que les stratégies de survie développées par celles-ci pour répondre à cette précarité socio-économique. L'étude conclut que la migration contribue à la féminisation de la marginalité sociale. En définitive, l'étude interpelle les autorités et décideurs à mettre en œuvre des politiques sociales contribuant à l'autonomisation des femmes afin de lutter contre la précarité et la marginalité société.

Mots clés : Migration, femmes, marginalité, genre, politique de survie.

Resumen

Este trabajo de investigación es un examen crítico de la dinámica de la migración y de la búsqueda de supervivencia de las mujeres en *The Housemaid* de Amma Darko. El estudio ve la migración de mujeres del campo a la ciudad en la novela como una transición hacia nuevas formas de precariedad y vulnerabilidad creadas por estructuras socioeconómicas duras generadas por el patriarcado. Afirma que los personajes femeninos son constantemente relegados a posiciones socioeconómicas precarias debido a las expectativas de género, las estructuras laborales explotadoras y el desplazamiento migratorio. Basándose en un enfoque feminista poscolonial, el estudio demuestra cómo la migración interna funciona como un mecanismo que profundiza la marginación de las mujeres en entornos urbanos represivos. El artículo sostiene que la narrativa de Darko revela la continuidad estructural entre la migración y la vulnerabilidad socioeconómica de las mujeres, así como las estrategias de supervivencia que implementan para enfrentarse a esta precariedad socioeconómica. El estudio termina por revelar que la migración contribuye a la feminización de la marginalidad social a través de los roles laborales de género. En última instancia, el estudio llama a las autoridades y a los responsables de la toma de decisiones a implementar políticas sociales que contribuyan al empoderamiento de las mujeres para contrarrestar la precariedad y la marginalidad social.

Palabras clave: Migración, mujeres, marginalidad, género, políticas de supervivencia.

Introduction

The operative matrix of postcolonial African literature lies in its ability to formulate instructive and intellectually grounded critiques of pressing societal issues such as migration, gender, poverty, precarity, social vulnerability and various forms of societal marginalities that shape the daily lives of individuals in the society. Amma Darko, one of the committed voices in the project of emancipation of postcolonial Africa, will side with this operative matrix of postcolonial literature fighting for social justice and empowerment. It is within this critically committed perspective that she makes a significant contribution through her novel, *The Housemaid*, in which she offers a captivating portrayal of contemporary social realities, foregrounding issues such as migration, gender oppression and socio-economic vulnerability and marginality that plague the daily life of individuals in postcolonial Ghana. Considering *The Housemaid* as a realist and socially engaged narrative, the current paper intends to provide a critical representation of migration as a gendered experience shaped by the politics of social marginality, vulnerability and exploitation.

Migration is an issue of topicality which has received much attention in many academic fields of study such as social sciences, arts, humanities as well as in literature, yielding a wide range of definitional approaches. In literary studies, the term migration refers to “the oscillatory and unconclusive processes that manifest themselves on different levels in the literary work – for example in relation to personal, national, and cultural identity, language, narrative form, and enunciation” (S. Frank, 2008, p. 8). Although the rendition of the concept of migration in the current study adopts a literary analysis perspective, the analysis is aligned with the definition of migration given by Pourjafari Fatemeh and Vahidpour Abdolali on the theoretical perspective of migration literature when they write “migration refers to the trend of displacement and movement made by individuals with the hope to find more personal convenience or better their material or social conditions” (P. Fatemeh and V. Abdolali, 2014, p. 680).

By reading migration as a movement of individuals with the hope to have better social conditions, this research paper intends to interrogate the interplay between migration, gender and labor by asking: how does the novel represent migration as a condition that produces and sustains the feminization of social marginality through gender labor roles? To provide insightful accounts to address in full details the development of the research question, the study adopts feminist perspectives to highlight how migration functions as reconfiguration of the politics of social marginality within urban economies where women are experiencing social precarity. It puts stress on the specific challenges faced by women navigating urban environments and exploitive economic structures. To sketch in full the outlines of the arguments to back the standpoint of the inquiry, it is deemed necessary to structure the analysis around three parts. The first part deals with the understanding of the main roots of migration dynamics in the Ghanaian context. The second part is concerned with the challenges of urban mobility that lead to female precarity. And the third and last part addresses the politics of survival adopted by women to cope with their social and economic survival through the assertion of their agency.

1. Migration Dynamics: Understandings the Roots

Amma Darko blazes with an erudite asperity to pertinently paint the movement of the population from countryside to urban settlements. In reading *The Housemaid*, the readers observe a great wave of intra-country migration from poor countryside to large cities in postcolonial Ghanaian society. The narrative represents this wave of intra-migration as a dynamic movement of individuals shaped by gender expectations and hope for livelihood security and better social conditions. The main drive of these intra-country migrations is justified by lack of basic services, job opportunities and precarious living conditions in rural zones. This yearning for shifting from rural zones to urban settlements with the hope and expectation to find better living conditions is portrayed as the root causes of local migration in *The Housemaid*. The narrative gives an account of the root causes of these intra-country migrations when it depicts the harsh and precarious living conditions of individuals living in rural zones in these lines:

Kataso, a village in the eastern hills, had no flowing water, no electricity, no entertainment centre, nothing. The young men, when they could no longer stand this bland grey life, would leave for Accra, Kumasi, Takoradi, to work as shoe-shine boys, truck pushers or hawkers of items such as popcorn, dog chains and air fresheners along the cities' busiest streets (A. Darko, 1998, p. 29).

The excerpt above highlights the main drives of rural-urban migration of individuals challenging bland grey life in poor villages. It aligns with Andreasson and his colleagues' postulations according to which "conditions of precarity force people to navigate their daily lives, including migrating, and that hope is never absent within these navigations, although it can be disrupted (Andreasson et al, 2026, p. 5). These postulations disclose how the social dimension of securing livelihood and hope to find new opportunities in urban environments sculpts the migration trajectories of rural people seeking better personal convenience and better social conditions when they are experiencing blank grey life in rural zones. The portrayal of Kataso as a rural space without basic amenities is a perfect illustration of the basic motifs of intra-country migration in postcolonial Ghana. C. Fumagalli and K. Schaefer (2020, p. 41), give more evidences as far as the main drivers of migration are concerned when they write "migrants tend to move to cities where they expect to find better opportunities resulting from the concentration of economic activities or safer environments than their

current location". The absence of water, electricity and social infrastructure reveals the long-standing precariousness of living conditions in rural zones. The lack of these basic services makes rural life socially and economically unviable forcing young people to migrate in search of employment opportunities and hope for better living conditions in urban settlements. The migration motif of girls like Akua aligns with the search for personal convenience and better living conditions. The narrative provides some details about the main drive of her movement from her home village to Kumasi in these lines "Akua did. There are many girls here working as porters, who had bolted from home to seek greener pastures, just like her" (A. Darko, 1998, p. 31). Considering their unbending search for 'greener pastures', one can understand that the main drivers of migration for these groups of individuals are a life-saving response crucial to their social and economic security and well-being.

While the main drivers of migration of male characters in the novel are characterized by their willingness and hope to find 'greener pastures' or better living conditions in urban centers, most of the migratory experiences of females were trapped in socio-cultural assumptions. The migratory adventure of female characters is mostly shaped by patriarchal expectations and predispositions that confine them to unpaid or underpaid domestic labor. The narrative depicts the circumstances of the intra-national movement of female population in these lines: "girls, in contrast, were sent for by relations or contacts in the cities to work as housemaid and babysitting, though many eventually ended up as iced-water sellers and prostitutes" (A. Darko, 1998, p. 30). Here, the rural-urban mobility of girls is not an individual choice but a collective undertaking orchestrated by family bond.

This politics of conveyance of young girls as working force into urban zones through family relations or contacts is rooted in patriarchal and capitalist social reproduction of labor. In tandem of this patriarchal and capitalist social reproduction of labor, some feminist political economists such as M. Benston (1969, p. 13) believe that "there is a material basis for women's status; we are not merely discriminated against, we are exploited. At present, our unpaid labor in the home is necessary if the system is to function". Applying this to the case of young girls in the narrative, it comprehensively comes out that the rationale behind the family's involvement in securing jobs for young girls such as Efi is an extension and the

propagation of capitalist and patriarchy rules for the functioning and the maintenance of the system.

In these circumstances, capitalist and patriarchal rules establish what S. Federaci (2004, p. 97) calls “the patriarchy of the wage” through the family to appropriate women’s labor. The materialization of the ‘patriarchy of the wage’ reinforces women’s subjugation and commodification. Efi’s migratory experience in the narrative is entrapped in the patriarchy of wage. During the negotiation of Efi’s migration contract to settle as housemaid in the city, two compelling questions laden with patriarchal assumptions were raised by one of the patriarchal figures in these terms: “so now can we also know how you intended to reward our child for her service?” and “What are we getting out of our daughter’s going away to the city to serve somebody?” (A. Darko, 1998, p. 41, 43). By taking a critical look at the rationale behind these questions, one figures out the manifestation of what Walby Sylvia hails as “private patriarchy”. S. Walby (1990, p. 24) writes that “in the private patriarchy the expropriation of women’s labor takes place principally by individual patriarchs within the household”.

As a result, Efi’s father assuming the role of the family patriarch sees her daughter as a commodity or a marketable asset that will secure livelihood for the benefit of the family as a whole. Analyzing the attitude of Efi’s father as the family patriarch, one comes to understand the dynamics of social reproduction of “inequitable sex/gender divisions of labor as key to women’s oppression in capitalist societies (S. Braedley and M. Luxton, 2021, p.4). Women’s oppression in capitalist societies leads to miserable and precarious living conditions that J. Butler (2004, p. XVII) calls “precarious life”. The life of many female migrants in *The Housemaid* is entrapped in gender injustice and social precarity.

2. Migration, Gender and Precariousness

Gender and precariousness are interconnected issues that are handled with special care in Darko’s politics of addressing women’s migratory experiences. The representation of the precariousness of life that is at stake in male-female relations in *The Housemaid* sustains that “migration is a gendered experience” (S. Smith and B. Djoudalbaye, 2020, p. 172). The

representation of this gendered experience in the context of the *Housemaid* reproduces a politics of gender injustice detrimental to female gender. Darko's pronouncement of gender in the process of migration is built on C. N. Adichie's theoretical framing of gender as a grave injustice. Advocating her feminist postulations on gender issues in postcolonial Africa, C. N. Adichie (2014, p. 21) argues that "gender as it functions today is a grave injustice". Applying this postulation of gender through male-female relations in the narrative understudy, it discloses female precarity, vulnerability and marginality. The portrayal of gender as a grave injustice is highly underlined in the narrative in these terms: "in Ghana, if you come into the world as a she (...) count you among the forsaken and forgotten" (A. Darko, 1998, p. 3). This statement is ideologically loaded with meaning. It is an expansion of a stark critique of social hierarchies' construction through the lens of gender in Ghanaian contexts where being born female is symbolically equated with marginality, precariousness, vulnerability and invisibility. It reflects a system of socio-cultural hierarchies in which women's identities are inscribed on the margin counting them among the 'forsaken and forgotten'. As a form of a grave injustice, gender becomes a socio-cultural machinery through which the material precariousness, deprivation and effacement of women are erected.

In *The Housemaid*, the representation of gender as a grave injustice to female is inscribed in every single layer of the Ghanaian society from countryside to urban settlements. In surveying the novel, the readers come to realize that the author represents the politics of migration as a gendered experience of marginality, where women's mobility does not lead to hope of securing livelihood for social and economic empowerment but to socio-economic precarity or marginality. In this respect, Darko uncovers the feminization of precarity, vulnerability and rural and urban poverty seen as a failure of social mobility through the representation of migration as a gendered experience of marginality. The main critical point of these intra-country migrations from rural zones to urban ones is characterized by the yearning for bettering the living conditions and standards of life of those female migrants. A case in point is the precarious life and unwarranted living condition in which Akua and her friends are intertwined in the slum areas of Kumasi.

Akua as well as many female migrants have to deal with social and economic marginality as result of their settlement within informal places in the outskirts of Kumasi which are plagued by alarming problem of housing, water scarcity, sanitation and food security. They have to deal with unstable and precarious jobs and occupations within the informal sector on the busiest streets of Kumasi. Enjoying such a kind of shaky living conditions, Akua and her companions are unable to afford the basic services as well as health treatment within hospitals exposing them to insecurity, vulnerability and precariousness. To ground this condition in the narrative, the novel offers tangible substantiations that expose how female migrants like Akua navigate daily life in overcrowded settlements marked by scarcity, insecurity and social neglect as follows:

Like her mates, Akua had no regular home. They all lived on unfinished buildings; when final completion work started, they moved out. Thanks to brides of cash and sex, workers at the building sites regularly tipped them on the next place available for occupation (A. Darko, 1998, p. 32).

Akua, like many other female migrants, lives in poor conditions on the edges of Kumasi where basic needs are not met. Above all, they face unstable housing due to their settlements in the informal areas. This situation keeps them economically vulnerable and socially excluded. Many of these female migrants bear witness of the precariousness of their living and housing conditions. The conversation between Akua and her companions in the narrative sequence below provides a perfect illustration:

I have my own problems. The owner of my base has returned from abroad and wants to resume work on his building, so I had to bride Atinga yesterday with a couple of quick rounds behind the blue kiosk to get him to find me a new place.... Well, Akua came in, as for me, fortunately work has been suspended on my building. I hear the owner has travelled to some country to get work and make money to come back and complete it. So, for the next year at last neither Atinga nor any of them will see my pants (A. Darko, 1998, p. 95).

The passage reflects social dimension of the precariousness of life and the lack of protection. It exposes the extreme vulnerability and the precariousness of life in the slum areas of Kumasi. Face to this precarious life, a number of survival strategies are developed by female migrants. They make use of transactional sex as a means to secure shelter to solve their housing problems. The development of these housing problems combined with sexual transaction as illustrated in the passage above highlights the ongoing insecurity of female

migrants in the slum areas of Kumasi. In apparent reflection of this, the survival of these female migrants depends on unpredictable and informal arrangements.

3. The Politics of Survival: Between Agency and Constraint

In experiencing precarious life as a result of their urban settlements, many female characters in *The Housemaid* have been compelled to develop a number of strategies to transform their ordinary acts of endurance into forms of agency to negotiate their social precariousness. Survival politics in *The Housemaid* is closely associated with the strategies, practices and all forms of agency through which female migrants get hold of their basic needs and protect their existence in the slum areas of the urban zones. For A. Bayat (2000, p. 539), “survival strategy model goes one step forward, implying that although the poor are powerless, nevertheless they do not sit around waiting for their fate to determine their lives. Rather they are active in their own way to ensure their survival”. Drawing inference from Asef Bayat’s postulation of survival politics, it goes without saying that survival politics is the set of everyday strategies through which vulnerable people secure their livelihoods and ensure their survival under conditions of social precariousness.

One of the survival strategies deployed by some female characters to escape the precariousness of life in their migratory adventure is marriage. A case in point is Cherry, the wife of Nsorhue. Cherry’s story is punctuated by very bitter and tragic episodes. From the privileged life of a minister’s daughter, she finds herself adrift after the government’s overthrow. She lives a nightmarish existence in a European suburb, surviving only by taking odd jobs such as cleaning and toilet maintenance. She manages to escape this hardship through her marriage contract with the wealthy banker Nsorhue, who provides her with shelter from the precarious life that had robbed her will to live. The narrator depicts Cherry’s daily life rushed headlong in the darkness of abysmal precarity where material deprivation and uncertainties profoundly shape her existence in these terms: “Cherry was a very frustrated Ghanaian woman struggling to make a life in London. She cleaned toilets by day and served in a very run-down bar at night” (A. Darko, 1998, p. 83). However, her marriage to Nsorhwe marks a decisive turning point in her life. Freed from the precariousness that had

characterized her daily existence, Cherry now enters a world of prosperity and fulfilment. The narrator gives an account of her new life out of precariousness here:

She gave Nsorhwe the good news, and events unfolded just she had imagined over and over again in her head. Nsorhwe promptly proposed. They married. She bore the child. Nsorhwe officially adopted her first child. They returned to Ghana with their son and daughter. And the one-time toilet cleaner became Mrs. Bank Manager with a driver to take her wherever she ordered, plus a houseboy, a housemaid and a gardener, all at her beck and call" (A. Darko, 1998, p. 85).

Through this description, it is emphasized that Cherry's marriage to Nsorhwe appears as the catalyst for upward social mobility, allowing her to survive and break free from the chronic precarity that had previously compromised her living conditions.

Apart from marriage, Akua and her friends use transactional sex as a currency to temporary address their housing problems in living in precarity. Akua and her companions live in a context of acute socioeconomic hardship within the impoverished neighborhoods of Kumasi characterized by a lack of descent housing and limited access to essential amenities. Faced with these particularly difficult living conditions, they resort to sexuality as a transactional resource and a survival strategy. The narrative sheds light on this survival politics based on sexual exchange when one reads:

And, turning to Akua and the others, she said, 'I have my own problems. The owner of my base has returned from abroad and wants to resume work on my building, so I had to bribe Atinga yesterday with a couple of quick rounds behind the blue kiosk to get him to find me new place.' 'Two rounds? The one with the plaited hair screamed. Ei! Then, you really tried! The time I did it only one round with him, and I had to sit on hot water for two days!' Well, Akua came in, as for me, fortunately work has been suspended on my building. I hear the owner has travelled to some country to get work and make money to come back and complete it. So, for the next year at last neither Atinga nor any of them will see my pants (A. Darko, 1998, p. 95).

In *The Housemaid*, "survival is not a personal attribute but a necessary economic activity that coerced through moral compulsion" (D. Kumar, 2026, p. 4). Characters like Tika and her mother Sekywia make use of trade and entrepreneurship to answer to the precarious socio-economic conditions that shape their daily life. The narrative depicts Tika and her mother as businesswomen who deploy trade and entrepreneurship as practical strategies of resistance to counter poverty and precariousness. From a critical perspective, their engagement in informal economic activities can read as of a form of survival politics. The

narrative describes Sekyiwa as a businesswoman who owns “a big shop” of “textile prints” and who is “one of the wealthy market mammies” (A. Darko, 1998, p. 18). Living under conditions of social precarity, Sekyiwa turns to informal trading and commercial activities to secure the livelihoods of her household. She makes this standpoint clear when she addresses to her daughter Tika in these terms: “I have to make money to look after us” (A. Darko, 1998, p. 18). In this thinking, Sekyiwa resorts to trade as a necessary economic activity to survive the precarious socio-economic conditions of her household.

To protect her daughter from the precarious socio-economic conditions that decimate the future of most of the individuals in her society, Sekyiwa seeks the services of an entrepreneurial coach to teach her daughter Tika the fundamentals of entrepreneurial business. In this respect, the narrative makes it clear that “Sekyiwa asked a friend who was already in the business to coach Tika in the basics. Then she signed Tika a fat cheque as capital” (A. Darko, 1998, p. 21). Knowing that entrepreneurship constitutes a practical strategy to survive social precarity, Sekyiwa guides the feet of her daughter into the entrepreneurial domain to equip her with the necessary competence to counter socio-economic precariousness. The readers were informed that after her training in entrepreneurship, Tika “invested all in her business – her brains, her energies, her dignity. And she succeeded” (A. Darko, 1998, p. 21). By portraying Tika as a successful female entrepreneur, the author suggests that entrepreneurship constitutes a practical means for countering socio-economic precarity. Observing Sekyiwa and her daughter Tika’s strategic use of entrepreneurial practices as a survival politics, it can be argued that entrepreneurship as represented through trade and commercial activities offers a means of survival that liberate individuals from socio-economic precariousness.

Conclusion

The study has demonstrated *The Housemaid* offers a compelling representation of the feminization of social marginality through the interconnected dynamics of internal migration, gender and labor. The main drive of these intra-country migrations is justified by lack of basic services, job opportunities and precarious living conditions in rural zones. The study argues that the yearning for shifting from rural zones to urban settlements with the hope and

expectation to find better living conditions is developed as the root causes of local migration. In surveying the novel, the readers come to realize that the author represents the politics of migration as a gendered experience of marginality, where women's mobility does not lead to hope of securing livelihood for social and economic empowerment but to socio-economic precarity and marginality. In this respect, Darko uncovers the feminization of precarity, vulnerability and rural and urban poverty seen as a failure of social mobility through the representation of migration as a gendered experience of marginality. While the study establishes that migration is motivated by the hope of securing better economic opportunities and improved living conditions, Darko reveals that it frequently exposes women to heightened vulnerability, exploitation and precarious forms of labor. The experience of Cherry, Akua, Tika and Sekyiwa illustrates how female migrants negotiate structural inequalities through diverse survival strategies, including marriage, transactional sex and entrepreneurial activities. By foregrounding these gendered trajectories, the author critiques the socio-economic conditions that produce female marginalization while simultaneously highlighting women's agency and resilience in confronting the challenges of postcolonial Ghanaian society. Ultimately, Darko calls for establishing systems of social structures and practices that will "help Ghana's poor, old, lonely women" (A. Darko, 1998, p. 21) to be empowered and overcome social precariousness and marginality.

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